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THE SISTERS

BY GORDON SCHENDEL

Do you remember a radio show — long gone — called "Lights Out"? And there was another eerie little job they named "The Hermit's Cave." Well, if you liked their brand of glee-ful ghoulishness, you'll go for this yarn. 'Nough said.

THE big, ugly old house on the edge of town, half hidden by somber blue spruce, was set well back from the road in two acres of weed-grown lawn bounded by a rusting wrought-iron fence. Long ago, the house had been the town showplace and the scene of lavish parties and musicales, but now children walked quickly when they were forced to pass it and virtually no outsider ever entered its sagging scrolled gates.

Twilight was fast blurring the harsh outlines of the tortuous gingerbread fretwork, the shallow false balconies and the octagonal "tower" with its stained-glass windows. It was that stand-still time when the furry daylight creatures have retired and the creatures of darkness have not yet crept out of their holes, from under their rotting logs or up through the green slime of stagnant pools. It was the time, too, when the funereal firs exude their

spicy aroma most pungently, and the small sounds of living only emphasize the heavy transitional silence.

A warbler in a twisted cedar near the house spilled forth a burst of song that died on a sad, haunting note. And from a wind-warped sycamore standing alone in a distant field came a faint, final answer.

But the two middle-aged, startlingly-alike women who were striding about at one side of the house, with five or six nondescript cats, paid no attention to bird songs. The sisters — drably garbed, large boned, with their lank hair drawn tightly back from their gaunt faces — instead stalked grimly back and forth, each with a stick in her hand, peering intently at the ground.

Ellen Brewster was watching them from the narrow, dark kitchen of the house, where she was washing up the dishes. Ab-

ruptly — just as she set the last soapy plate on the wooden drain-board and poured out the dish-water — one sister screamed hoarsely at a cat which had pounced on something in the grass. Then she forced the animal away with her stick and stooped to pick up a small object. The other sister hurried over eagerly to peer at it.

Ellen dumped a box of wormy oatmeal, which she wasn't going to cook no matter what *they* said, into the meager garbage and carried it outside, carefully keeping the toolshed between herself and her employers. As she scattered the garbage over the fence, the sisters' shrill voices came to her clearly. After listening a moment, she tiptoed into the shed, picked her way between the stacked boxes of trash and rubbed at the dust-grimed window at the front with the heel of her hand. Priscilla Colton was standing directly beneath the window, holding a dead sparrow.

There was the sound of an unseen car grinding noisily into the gravelled driveway. Startled, the sisters raised their heads and stared with undisguised hostility until a green sedan emerged into their view and drew up before the house.

"Oh, just Dr. Potter," Priscilla shrugged. The look of fascination returned to her face as she bent,

once more, over the horrible thing in her hand, while her sister crowded close for a final look. Then, with a regretful sigh, Priscilla replaced the foul bit of carrion in the weeds, as gently as if it were some cherished pet. One of the cats darted forward, but she forestalled it with a vicious swipe of her stick that sent the animal caterwauling into the thick woods behind the house.

Shaking her head exasperatedly, Ellen left the shed and returned to the kitchen.

Dr. Potter stepped briskly out of his car and reached for his small black satchel. A chubby, white-haired man who retained the smooth pink cheeks, the guileless eyes and the unquenchably cheerful manner of a Boy Scout, Dr. Potter had been called in some years earlier by the Colton girls' father for what proved to be that old gentleman's final illness. And he'd continued to call once a week ever since, having transferred his administrations to the girls' mother. He'd treated the taciturn, now-bedridden old lady with an amazing variety of pills, medicines and bedside jovialities. But he either did not know, or at least never had disclosed, the name of the malady from which she'd so long been suffering.

"Good evening!" the doctor called breathlessly, approaching at an eager trot. "And how is your mother this evening?"

"Poorly, Doctor, poorly." Priscilla, always the spokesman, gave her stock answer to the stock question. And both sisters, like dutiful children reluctantly leaving their play, moved slowly forward, with their cats tumbling about their legs.

By now, the fading light in the western sky had almost completely drained off beneath the horizon, and a bat fluttering overhead was virtually invisible against the firs. Priscilla stepped onto the sagging porch and silently opened the front door. Dr. Potter moved past her with a "Thank you!" that sounded much too loud in the pitch-black, musty-smelling parlor.

In the distance, from across the flat farmlands that had once been marsh, a hound bayed, eerily, and the doctor waited almost nervously for one of the sisters to strike a light. But the girls had spun around in the doorway to stare back into the night.

"Hear that hound howl?" Priscilla asked, tensely. "Somebody," she whispered hoarsely, "is going to die!"

"Or *has* died!" Delight chimed in. "I wonder who? . . . Old man Harrigan? . . . Mrs. Feeley?" Her voice was tremulous and avid, as though she were tantalizing herself with exciting guesses.

"Nonsense, girls, nonsense. Pure superstition!" the doctor interjected, testily.

The hound bayed again, and the rising night wind brought the mournful keening suddenly closer.

Priscilla emitted an almost ecstatic sigh.

Dr. Potter cleared his throat. "May we have a light, please?" His tone implied, tactfully but firmly, that his professional time was extremely valuable.

There was a moment of delay, as if the sisters were hoping for the hound to again give voice. Then Priscilla made her way swiftly into the dark room, the doctor heard the scrape of a matchhead on sandpaper and saw the tiny flare of light and Priscilla reaching overhead to light a gas jet on the wall. The flame shot up — almost every other house in town long since had been converted to electricity — and cast a weird pattern of light and shadow over the cavernous room, with its ornate Victorian furniture, stained and peeling wallpaper and painstakingly darned lace curtains that had been hanging at the tall, narrow windows nearly twenty years. The doctor wondered once more why the Coltons, with all their money, had let the place go to ruin so. But Priscilla was moving toward the open double doors of the adjoining downstairs bedroom and Dr. Potter, following, hastily resumed his professional smile.

Priscilla lit a gas jet just inside

the doorway. Its feeble light revealed a massive carved bedstead piled high with rumpled patchwork quilts and, at its head, sunk deep in a goosedown pillow, the face of Dr. Potter's elderly patient.

"Well, well," the doctor boomed cheerfully. "And how are you tonight, Mrs. Colton?"

There was no response from the bed — though usually the grim little old lady would open her beady eyes and scowl or mutter something unintelligible when thus aroused from her almost perpetual light naps.

Dr. Potter bent over the bed, jerked down the heavy quilts and placed his ear against his patient's wasted chest — at the same time picking up one of her bony, talon-like wrists. After a moment, he dropped her hand and quickly took his stethoscope from his little black bag, fitted the ear-plugs to his ears, and again bent over the old woman, applying the receiver cup to the region of her heart. After a minute he stood up, slowly, looking like an embarrassed small boy, about to cry.

"I'm sorry . . ." he said, in a sepulchral tone. "Your mother has passed away."

There was a stunned silence, as the girls looked unbelievably from him to their mother. The dim light played grotesquely over the dead woman's deeply wrin-





kled, sunken cheeks, and sagging, toothless jaws. And, as the lamp flame flickered, it was reflected now and again by that part of the dead woman's eyeballs not covered by the drooped eyelids—giving the odd effect that the old lady was still slyly watching them.

"Poor Ma," Priscilla said mechanically. "She was just as always when I gave her her medicine."

But the sisters did not burst into tears. They stared at their dead mother silently, and then back at the doctor, with a queer gleam in their eyes. Then they looked into each other's faces, tensely.

"When . . . How long ago?" Priscilla whispered, breathlessly.

The doctor cleared his throat. "Not long," he said. To avoid looking into her piercing eyes, he turned to put his stethoscope back into his satchel, then gently pulled the sheet up over the face on the pillow. "*Rigor mortis* hasn't yet set in. Probably within the last hour."

In the silence that followed, the three who stood in the room once more heard the distant mournful baying of the hound.

The sisters' eyes met again, swiftly.

"It was Ma!" Priscilla gasped. "It was Ma that hound meant, and we didn't guess!"

"Girls, you can, er, be com-

forted by the thought that your mother is spared further suffering," the doctor said, uneasily. "She passed away peacefully."

He picked up his satchel and took a step toward the door. The sisters certainly showed little signs of grief, but after all they'd been expecting the old lady to die for years. Bedridden and senile, she'd only been half alive, anyway. Aloud, he said, briskly, "I'd better hurry back to town and phone Bartz before he goes to bed, so he can come out and get the body tonight yet." He was edging past the sisters, but abruptly Priscilla blocked his way, her eyes flashing wildly and her whole body trembling.

"No! . . . No! . . . No!" she almost shrieked. "We don't want the undertaker! He can't take our mother away! No! She belongs to us! . . . We'll never let him in!"

"But . . . But . . ." the doctor sputtered. "Now, now, Priscilla . . . I realize bereavement is always a shock. But you're a sensible woman. You know you can't keep your mother here."

"But we're *going* to keep her here! Aren't we, Delight?"

"Priscilla, please be sensible!" The doctor took out a handkerchief and patted his perspiring forehead. "Your mother's body *must* be embalmed and buried. Aside from the health regulations, you know you wouldn't want to

keep it here. Besides," he floundered, "your mother already has left you; that's merely her body . . ."

Priscilla glared at him with a look of almost insane hatred. But after a moment, she dropped her eyes and capitulated, meekly. "All right, Doctor, just as you say. Bartz may come tonight. But he can't take her away with him. He must do his work here, where we can watch him! She's ours!"

"But . . ." Dr. Potter was aghast at what she was demanding. "Why, you don't want to witness that . . . Why . . ."

Priscilla's eyes flashed. "Yes, we do! Don't we, Delight?" Delight nodded agreement, her own eyes alight with anticipation. "He won't get inside this house otherwise! You tell him."

The doctor looked uncertainly from one grimly determined face to the other, then helplessly inclined his head to indicate he was accepting this gruesome compromise. He mumbled, "Good night!", and almost fled through the gloomy parlor. He turned at the front door to call back, sternly, "But for heaven's sake, keep those blasted cats out of your mother's room!"

Then Dr. Potter hurried through the dew-wet grass, climbed in his car, and jammed his foot down on the starter.

Henry Bartz was thinking how

he hated his work as he drove his lumbering hearse on the road to the Colton place. He'd always been ashamed of making money from other folks' sorrow. And then, too, there was his wife's attitude: The day he'd completed his mortician's course after failing in the furniture business, she'd informed him she'd go into screaming hysterics if any hands that had messed around with dead people's bodies ever touched her own soft, voluptuous one. And though, during the years since, she'd proved to be not quite a woman with an unbreakable will, life had been difficult.

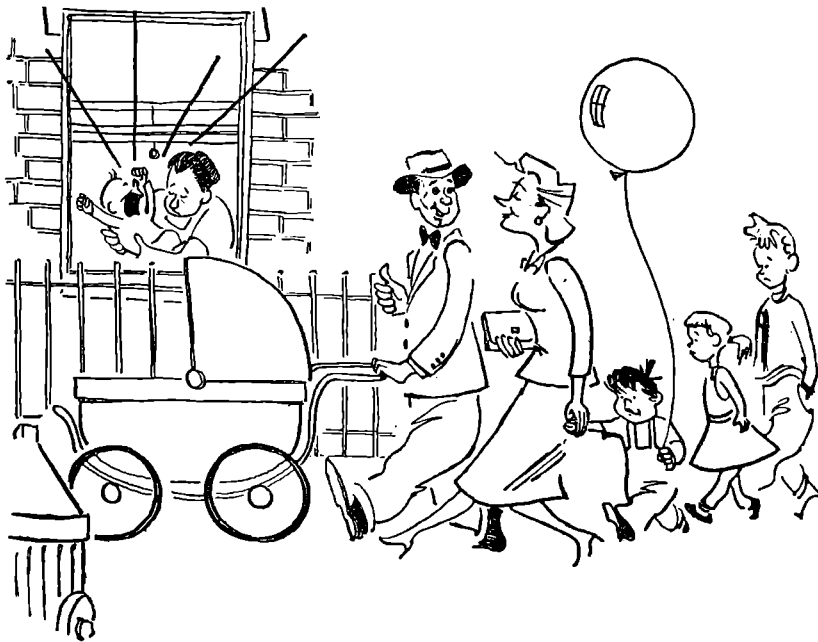
Bartz was driving the hearse rather than his car because he still hoped he could persuade the Colton sisters to allow him to take the body to his funeral parlor to do the embalming. But he doubted he'd have much luck. His thoughts shifted to the peculiarities of the Colton sisters.

Priscilla had been a born old maid from childhood. But Delight, the younger one, had been a popular, fun-loving girl, and in those days the big old mansion had been filled with a constant stream of her friends and admirers. The Coltons had gone abroad several times, and Delight had become engaged to the younger son of a titled family. But then, just before the wedding, her domineering mother and sister, who'd

inexplicably opposed the match, had managed to break it up. Shortly thereafter, the young man had married an English girl — and Delight had changed overnight into a bitter carbon copy of her colorless older sister.

When old Jeremiah Colton had died, his wife and daughter had given him the most lavish funeral the town had ever known. And then they'd abruptly announced that there never would be another trip to Europe, that they would never again participate in the town's social life — and that they intended to have built, in the

modest little hilltop cemetery, a \$20,000 family mausoleum — a form of interment for the father so pretentious and foreign to the townspeople's concept of Christian burial that it was regarded as verging on the barbaric. And the Colton women had kept their word, for they never again had appeared in public except when they (infrequently) attended church, or a funeral (they never missed a funeral, whether or not they knew the deceased), or made their weekly pilgrimages to the big marble mausoleum to "visit" their father. And, though they



"Honey — they're playing our song."

spent large sums on floral pieces, and on their dismal excursions dressed in elegant black silk, they never again spent a cent on their home, or in entertaining, or in providing themselves with any of the comforts and little luxuries they could so well have afforded.

After their mother became bed-ridden, the girls almost never left the house. And little was known of their way of life, except from the tales of the disgruntled, low-paid hired girls who came and went so rapidly — tales of the sisters' fantastic economies (the stale bread they bought because it was a couple of cents cheaper than the fresh, the grocers' crates they made the hired girls lug home to burn in the wood stove because they were free, the moldering furniture, the dangerous falling plaster, the unused upstairs bedrooms stacked halfway to the ceiling with boxes of trash, old newspapers and bottles); tales of the way the sisters allowed their numerous cats to run wild in the house; and, above all, of the sisters' morbid preoccupation with disease and death (their endless discussions of funerals and comparisons of one corpse with another, the medical and "doctor" books they avidly read, the little wakes they staged for the cats that died) . . . But though all of this was a frequent subject of gossip in the town, most people

had a hard time believing it, for the highly-respected Coltons had been the town's leading family, and besides, on the rare occasions when the sisters *did* appear in public, they still made a fine, genteel appearance. . . .

But there was no doubt about it, the two old maids were certainly queer. Henry Bartz shook his head and stepped on the brake so abruptly that his man of all work who'd been snoring on the seat beside him was thrown forward against the dashboard. Old Jake swore softly, and Bartz turned between the big sagging gates and into the poplar-lined driveway. The hearse bounced over the ruts, creaking and groaning, and came to a stop before the monstrous old house — a shapeless black mass in the moonlight, with light gleaming feebly through only a single side window.

Bartz tossed away his mangled cigar butt, strode onto the porch and knocked on the screen door. An owl hidden overhead in the dark spruces hooted weirdly. Then Bartz jumped, startled, as a voice spoke from the darkness not more than three feet away.

"You can just turn that hearse around and drive it right back, Mr. Bartz! You won't be needing it," the voice said, furiously. "You're not taking our mother one step out of this house!"

Bartz now dimly made out the faces of the two sisters just inside

the screen door — where they'd evidently been waiting in the darkness.

"We have Mother all ready for you," Priscilla continued, more calmly. "You may bring in your equipment and get to work. If you don't care to do that, we'll get the undertaker from Eastport!"

Well, after all, Bartz told himself, wearily, he'd expected this. He called to old Jake to carry his paraphernalia inside. And then he groped his way after the sisters through the unlit parlor to the bedroom doorway. There he received a shock.

The bedroom was lit only by half-a-dozen wax tapers, flickering in a row at the head of the bed. But instead of being entirely covered with a sheet, as the doctor had left it, the pathetically wasted, shrunken body of the little old lady was laid out nude on the bed.

"My sister and I have washed and prepared her for you," Priscilla said, efficiently. "Now just go ahead with your work and don't mind us. We'll sit here and watch."

And with that, she and Delight sat down in the two straight-back chairs which were lined up before the bed like first-row seats in a theater.

"But, Miss Colton!" Bartz gasped. "You can't really mean . . . You don't realize what you're saying. You don't understand what . . . Some of the things I

have to do. . . ." For he was remembering his own reaction the first time he'd witnessed the ghoulish routine he had to go through. Such things as the insertion of the anal plug . . . the draining of blood from the body, and substitution of the preservative fluid . . . the puncturing of the abdomen to provide an escape for forming gas . . . the tacking down of the eye-lids, the sewing together of the lips. . . . He'd been violently sick to his stomach, even though he'd been a student, forewarned of what he was to see. . . . And this was their own mother!

"We know just what you have to do, don't we, Delight?" Priscilla said primly. Delight nodded agreement and pulled her chair forward a little. "We do not wish to leave our Mother alone. So begin, Mr. Bartz!" Priscilla ordered, with finality.

Bartz looked from one pair of hungrily staring eyes to the other, and then at the shriveled body on the bed, over which the wavering yellow candlelight was playing queer tricks. The owl out in the spruces hooted again, derisively. . . .

Just then Jake slouched through the doorway, loaded down with equipment. His jaw sagged and he almost dropped his armload when he saw the two sisters settled down expectantly beside the bed.

Henry Bartz never forgot that job.

He was naturally not a talkative man. And like a doctor, he'd always considered it unethical to discuss his profession. But he couldn't refrain from telling his wife about the night's work at the Colton place — and how the sisters had hung over his shoulder through every step, so as not to miss a movement. And, of course, then it got all around town the next day.

And that was the principal reason the funeral was so well attended three days later. Plain curiosity. Because, actually, brusque old lady Colton had alienated all of her still-living friends years before.

The Rev. J. Carleton Jones, a massive, consciously handsome man with neatly waved iron-gray hair and a jaunty mustache, sat in his study pleasantly re-living his funeral sermon. He rather enjoyed funerals. For, at funerals, he orated with a pipe-organ tremulo and, pulling all stops, fairly wallowed in emotionalism until there wasn't a dry eye in sight. His oration today had been particularly masterful, even though — he frowned, slightly — it had failed to wring a single tear from the two principal, black-veiled mourners. And it had been a pity that the steady drizzle had prevented many from going to the cemetery service. But, still, there

had been mountains of flowers (mostly provided by the bereaved daughters), and only once before in his life had he had the honor of consigning a departed parishioner to that magnificent mausoleum.

The Reverend frowned again, as a timid knock interrupted his musings. It was Ellen Brewster, the Coltons' hired girl, still in her black funeral attire.

"Reverend, I'm sorry to bother you. . . ." Ellen twisted her purse handle, nervously. "But I wonder if you'd know of a new place for me? You see, I've quit working for the Coltons."

"Oh, indeed, Ellen?" The Reverend nodded, sympathetically. "Yes, I'm sure we can easily find you another situation."

"Now that the Missus is dead," Ellen hesitated, "I felt they really didn't need me, and . . ." She burst into tears. ". . . And, oh Reverend . . . I just couldn't *stand* it any more!"

Tom Blasky, some weeks later, lay stretched out on the broken-down cot he'd hauled into the cemetery caretaker's toolhouse, listening to the rain drumming on the tin roof. The rain had interrupted him in the digging of a grave. He lifted the already half-emptied pint of bootleg to his lips and, in a series of rapid, adams-apple-moving swallows, reduced it to a quarter pint. Then he recorked the bottle, wiped his

mouth with the back of his dirt-seamed hand, and coughed explosively.

He'd been working at the cemetery over 20 years, digging graves and mowing grass. Working there had never bothered him — until recently. He'd seen the Colton sisters probably hundreds of times, beginning way back when they'd come to supervise the building of that big vault, more than ten years ago. Then they — and their mother, too, until she took to her bed — used to come out every week and put flowers on their father's casket.

Tom reached for the bottle again, uncorked it, and lifted it to his lips.

But the way they'd been since the old lady died — it wasn't good. No, it wasn't good. For nearly a month, now, they'd been coming every day, going inside the vault and staying sometimes hours. . . . And twice already, they'd made him do something terrible! And he didn't want to do it again. He'd had enough nightmares about it already. . . . But this storm ought to keep them home today, anyway. He was just drifting off to sleep when he heard somebody shouting his name: "Tom! Tom Blasky! Wake up!"

The Colton sisters were standing over him in glistening raincoats and hats.

"Mr. Blasky, will you get up, please!" Priscilla ordered. "We

want you to come with us into the vault."

Tom stumbled to his feet. No, no, he told himself, he didn't want to do that again. He started to mumble protests, but Priscilla curtly cut him off, and he found himself following her through the doorway. As he slouched outside, after the sisters, the driving rain beat hard on his face. It was getting dark early, and the looming trees scattered over the burying ground were bending and swaying in the wind. And then a near-blinding, gigantic flash of lightning bared, all at once, with sudden ghostly and gleaming clarity, the hundreds of pale marble and granite tombstones. In the immediately following blackness, Tom, who was staggering blindly after the sisters, ran head-on into their seldom-used, 25-year-old Packard sedan, parked in front of the tool-house.

In another blinding flash of lightning and deafening crash of thunder, they finally reached the massive, white-marble mausoleum. Priscilla unlocked the heavy bronze doors, and the sisters stepped quickly inside. Tom, though soaked to the skin, followed only very reluctantly. Priscilla lighted two large wax candles which stood, partially burned, in niches in the wall directly above the two coffins (and beside the two still-empty coffin ledges). De-

light shut the bronze doors until they were only slightly ajar, and at once the wild storm outside was muted by the thick stone walls.

Tom stood as close to the doors as possible, swaying unsteadily. This is not good, not good, he told himself. They shouldn't make me do this. The sisters moved to the newer coffin.

"All right, Tom," Priscilla said, her eyes shining oddly in the flickering candlelight. "You know what to do. Take the lid off mother's casket, so we can examine her again."

Tom moved unenthusiastically forward, put his hands on the lid and then recoiled.

"Come, Tom!" Priscilla said, sharply, like a teacher reprimanding a recalcitrant child. "Hurry! Lift the lid."

With a groan, Tom moved forward again and set to work.

Though he'd intended to keep his eyes averted, they were drawn, as if by a magnet, to the dead woman's face — which, though sunken, in the moving shadows of the flickering candlelight seemed so alive that he felt a chill running down his back. Priscilla and Delight bent over the satin-lined casket. After a couple of minutes of silence, Priscilla cried out, in a queer voice:

"Look, something is seeping from under her arm!"

At that moment the wind shifted and a cold gust of wind and rain

shot between the doors, blowing out the candles and leaving them in total darkness . . . a darkness suddenly heavy with a sickeningly sweet smell . . . the smell of death. . . . And in the blackness, Tom had the nightmare feeling that he had been hopelessly locked in the tomb with the two corpses, that he was in his own grave and slowly, horribly, suffocating to death.

As from a great distance, he heard Priscilla saying, calmly, "I have the matches." And a moment later she had re-lit the candles. "Shut the doors tight, Tom," she said, grimly.

Badly shaken, he did as she ordered.

The next day Tom Blasky went to the First National Bank and told its president, portly, white-haired John Winters, who was



"Look, Daddy — the first robin!"

chairman of the board of directors of the cemetery association, that he was quitting his job. Winters questioned him as to the reason, and so the story of the Colton sisters' macabre practices came out. Winters immediately called in Dr. Potter and Henry Bartz, who also were directors of the cemetery board, and after some shaking of heads, they drafted a note to the Colton girls. The note merely said that the cemetery association, in order to comply with state and village health regulations, henceforth was compelled to prohibit the opening of any coffin after it had been interred or placed in a vault, except under court order.

And so Tom Blasky never saw the old maids again. Not alive, that is.

Ten days later, Jimmy Mason, a small boy who lived on the edge of town, raced home to his mother almost too excited to talk, after having daringly peered in a window of the old Colton mansion. Dr. Potter, who was also the county coroner, hurried out to the place with big Charlie Wheeler, the town marshal. They drove the starving cats out of the house, then cut the two sisters down. The girls had hanged themselves, side by side, from the stairway balustrade. They'd been dead, Dr. Potter estimated, three days.

The sisters had willed their

entire estate to the cemetery association, for the enlargement and improvement of the grounds and the perpetual upkeep of all the graves in it. It took cleaning women nearly a month to sort and haul out the mountains of trash stored in the house.

In the bookcase containing the medical books, the cleaning women found three ledgers in which Priscilla had kept a running journal. These ledgers eventually made their way into the hands of Dr. Potter. He spent a week reading every word — then burned them in his fireplace.

Priscilla's journal had been an interminable thesis on death — a compilation of literately set-down facts gleaned from medical and undertaking textbooks, interlarded with the sisters' observations at funerals, their wild imaginings on the subject of death and dying, and the day-by-day gruesome details of their parents' last illnesses — becoming, toward the end, clearly the product of a demented mind. Priscilla's journal had concluded:

"Since the Cemetery Association has high-handedly barred us from further studies on the person of our dead mother, only one avenue of research remains open to us. Delight and I therefore choose to learn the ultimate facts of death — by personally experiencing it."